

COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT
Turrialba Network of Women Entrepreneurs
in
Sustainable Tourism - RETUS

(Spanish Acronym for Red de Emprendedoras del Turismo Sostenible de Turrialba)

History - Background

In 2016, Carolyn Wright, from Lewisville Morning Rotary Club visited the Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Center (CATIE) in Costa Rica to present the business model of her non-profit, *A-WOW/IGLI, International Girls Leadership Initiative*.

Inspired by her talk, Professor of Sustainability at CATIE, Dr. Eliecer Vargas decided to adapt the A-WOW/IGLI principles to a project he was considering launching with young women entrepreneurs in the Turrialba area where CATIE is located.

As a CATIE professor and Economist, Dr. Vargas oversees the Master of Science in Sustainable Tourism (MIST) program, is a joint project between CATIE and the University of North Texas (UNT) in Denton, Texas.

Dr. Vargas had been trying to promote development and outreach projects in the Turrialba area and had established strong relationships with rural entrepreneurs. By mid-2016, he had gathered information about local entrepreneurs who were engaged in Sustainable Tourism. He found that they shared three characteristics:

- a) They were all led by young women.
- b) They all worked and lived in rural Turrialba, and
- c) They wanted to help more young girls from their communities.

Dr. Vargas then interviewed six of these women entrepreneurs. He learned that they wanted to work together and establish an organization that could make their businesses grow and help other young women enter the tourism trade. They did not know how to go about doing that.

Community Assessment:

In 2017, these same six women, with help from Dr. Vargas, consolidated their efforts, drafted a proposal with action plans, and contracts. Below are the results of a series of interviews with them conducted by Dr. Eliecer Vargas, Carolyn Williams from Lewisville Morning Rotary Club and Karen McDaniels from Rotary Club of Denton, TX. In 2017 and 2018. Information from the interviews reflects their efforts in network-building activities and steps for the future, as a "work-in-progress". They now call their organization RETUS – *The Network of Women Entrepreneurs of Sustainable Tourism in Turrialba*.

What Are the Major Objectives of RETUS?

To consolidate the connections each woman independently has directly with customers such as tour operators and agencies in the US and Germany to offer a RETUS *Experiential Tourism package*.

The network allows the RETUS women to offer a more complete tourism package than what they would be able to do individually. It also allows young girls interested in tourism to learn, finance, and develop their own ideas.

How Does RETUS Work?

RETUS works as a tour-operator specializing in ***Experiential Tourism***. It offers tailor-make packages (package tours) to families, small groups and organizations.

Visitors stay in Turrialba for 4 to 7 days. During their tours, they experience Agro-tourism, adventure tourism, community-based tourism, eco-tourism, and some “custom” designed activities. RETUS members are the primary providers activities and logistics for each package. Additional or new services or products that are offered by RETUS will be arranged through one young woman that the network adopts and supports.

What Does RETUS Do with Its Profits?

After all services and products have been paid to the RETUS members, and legal obligations of doing business as a tour operator in Costa Rica have been covered, remaining profits are used to support other young women from rural communities in Turrialba. These young women request support from RETUS. Financial support given by RETUS is a micro- loan and not a gift or donation.

Who are the Members of RETUS?

RETUS members are individuals who:

- a) Are women,
- b) Have tourism as their major source of income,
- c) Have been receiving tourists for at least 5 years,
- d) Live in Turrialba County, and
- e) Have paid the RETUS membership fee.

Woman Entrepreneur	Location	Activity	Description
Esmeralda Calderón	Mollejones, Turrialba	Mollejones Rural Agro-Tourism	Tour Guide and Housewife Experiences in farming plantain and sugarcane, and the artisanal production of sugar. Visits to town elders and recreational

	activities in the area.		
Rosa Hernández	Pejibaye, Turrialba	Argo-ecological Farm	Owner-Operator Farm-to-Table meals sourced from their own harvest, Farm Tours. Recycling/Upcycling projects with waste materials from Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad , the government-run electricity and telecommunications services provider.
Karla Gómez Pereira	Santa Cruz de Turrialba	Agro-touristic Dairy Farm	Owner and Tour Guide Dairy and Cattle Farm tours. Experiences in Turrialba (Registered Designation of Origin) cheese-making, and sustainable farming practices.
Marie Beuchet	Pavones de Turrialba	Agro-ecological Farm Hacienda Monte Claro	Co-Owner and Business Manager Experience and explanation of organic Coffee farming and processing Reforestation for CO2 capture Bird-watching nature walks Animal Farm Tours 50 Km Mountain Bike Tours Canoeing Lodging and Meals at the Farm Local Tour Guide
Rosa Fernández	Colonia Agrícola de Guayabo, Turrialba	Agro Eco-tourism	Local Tour Guide Guided Tours of Tourist Attractions: Dairy farms, <i>La Muralla</i> waterfall, Guayabo National Monument, Bird watching
Mónica Leandro	Sitio de Mata, Turrialba	<i>Mirador</i> Restaurant at <i>Sitios de Angostura</i> Scenic Overlook	Breakfast and Lunch Accepts Volunteers for Community Projects

Table 1: RETUS members as of November 2017

Partnerships CATIE has Fostered to Support RETUS

Partnership in USA: A-WOW Girls Leadership and Future Without Poverty (FWOP)

Ideally, the Turrialba tourism experience packages would be marketed by RETUS counterparts in the United States: A-WOW and FWOP. Adapting the model developed by A-WOW, a package tour would be marketed by a contact in USA through either an intermediate organization or an NGO.

With earnings, RETUS makes decisions about supporting young women's projects and other tourism development initiatives. The business model has a clear support component for women's initiatives and is focused on the eradication of poverty. RETUS needs people who want to support them because RETUS will support other young women entrepreneurs: "help us to help them".

Partnership for the Germany Market: GIZ

The Triangular Cooperation for Sustainable Tourism (Germany, Costa Rica and Tunisia) Project is supporting RETUS by opening the possibility to study, reach and contact the Baden-Württemberg state market. During May 2016, students from the "International Tourism Management" master's program at Heilbronn University, near Stuttgart, Germany, came to Turrialba. After understanding the tourism product, they help students from MIST to identify companies and organizations that can be targeted as the market for RETUS. Two students from MIST are currently working on a) developing the package tour, and b) calibrating the package tour with the target market in Germany. After this, Heilbronn University students will design the Summer 2018 marketing campaign. This partnership will end by December 2018.

Southwest Airlines - Partnership for New Entrepreneurs Under RETUS:

In October 2017, Todd Spinks, Sustainability & Citizenship Advisor at Southwest Airlines, Dallas, TX, proposed that SWA become a RETUS Partner. Southwest Airlines has numerous programs that can potentially be essential to supporting RETUS. Details on this partnership currently include SWA Charitable Giving programs, Community Outreach and Volunteerism opportunities, internal stories and promotional material for employees and articles in the SWA on-board magazine. SWA has a long history of partnering with organizations with environmental and sustainability initiatives.

RETUS Challenges

As RETUS begins to grow and mature, the opportunities the women have prepared for have not materialized. They realize that implementation of their program is limited by their resources. After interviewing the women and learning about how they conduct their tours, the Community Assessment Team has identified and suggested some changes that will help not only the RETUS women but their communities as well:

1. They do not know how to identify their potential customers in the eco/experiential marketplace. They rely on referrals.

Example: Only one woman has a “guest book” that visitors can sign when they tour her farm. It is filled with more than 20 pages of guest names, email addresses and customer comments. Yet, she did not realize that this information could be mined for future business for RETUS.

2. Tourism can be a seasonal business. A good program assures tourist business year around in Costa Rica’s mild climate.

3. They need a marketing plan to understand who their customers are, where they will come from, how much they will pay and then develop new and/or additional tour packages.

4. Social Media and Internet is not available to them. This is critical for the development if RETUS is to be sustainable.

5. They are not meeting their financial expectations. They don’t have a goal and they do not have a business model for how to charge for their services. They need mentoring in financial management.

Example: A butterfly breeder sells her product to a “broker” because she does not know how to sell her products to potential customers. The broker sells the butterflies for between \$35-\$45 each. Yet she receives on \$1.00 to \$3.00 per butterfly.

6. The RETUS group recently opened their office on the CATIE campus. When they book a tour, they must rent a vehicle for that time. If there is more than one tour package, transportation is difficult to acquire.

7. The tour packages are all inclusive (transportation, meals, lodging) but package pricing does not reflect this, and their incomes are not growing as they had hoped.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Experiential/Ecotourism is a Growing Industry

What is Experiential Travel? Also known as *Immersion Travel*, it is a form of tourism in which people focus on experiencing a country, city or a place by connecting to its history, people and culture.

According to Origin Magazine, Experiential Travel is forecasted to grow at least 3.7% this year. The Ecotourism market accounts for 6% of the world’s GDP with a yearly growth rate of 5%.

Experiential/Eco travel can emphasize different areas of local life such as cuisine, culture, history, shopping, nature or social life, which then becomes the basis for a holistic travel experience.

The goal is to more deeply understand a travel destination's culture, people and history by connecting with it more than just by visiting it. Therefore, the traveler usually gets in touch with locals who give guidance on how to experience a place. Locals could be a friend, an accommodation host or another person.